

MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE PLAYING GAMES BASED INSTRUCTION AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION



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Abstract

Online games are becoming the most popular entertainment in modern societies. It has captivated people of different ages, especially the younger generations and it has been dramatically growing throughout the years. However, online games have negative images among Chinese traditional families and they are viewed with no educational value. Nonetheless, different studies have indicated that online games, such as the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) have a good social and educational impact on students' language skills as these allow them to improve their communicative skills using digital spaces, especially the MMORPGs. Because of this, MMORPGs based-instruction becomes a new phenomenon and is regarded as an authentic and innovative form of pedagogy and gaining momentum in the field of English education, especially in the Chinese context. This article aims to analyze online games whether they can be authentic sources for learning and developing language and culture especially English communication skills.

Keywords: Digital space, English language learning, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), MMORPGs-based instruction

Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are becoming a very popular genre of computer games that attract computer gamers enthusiasts worldwide. This relatively new genre becomes a new hub for socializing specifically for players in the virtual environment around the world. MMORPGs are not only viewed as a profitable business for games

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developers but recently become one of the innovative ways that can be used for education, especially in English education (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008). According to them, online games are important parts of entertainment with a long history in Chinese culture. With regards to educational purposes, however, many traditional Chinese families perceive online games as consequently harmful, as much, as drugs and alcohol. As a consequence, these online games are viewed as a waste of time and have no educational value (Jiang, 2014).

Literature Review

Roy Trubshaw invented the first MMORPGs in 1979 and it was called Multi-User Domain (MUD). It has then evolved and continued to attract gamers from all around the world. Furthermore, there are multi-platforms of MMORPGs emerging from different gaming companies from all over the globe (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008; Drachen, & Smith, 2008). The success of MMORPGs was contributed by the rapid advances in gaming technologies and the dramatic expansion of the Internet. Other than social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *WeChat*, and *WhatsApp*, MMORPGs also provide gamers to communicate in real-time communication through their avatars and in a more interactive manner as they can convey their expressions through the moving emoticons that are embedded in the games (Isara, 2006; Kongmee et al., 2011b; Peterson, 2010).

However, based on various studies, a few challenges need to be aware of when using MMORPGs. According to Foo and Koivisto (2004) and Yee (2006), online games are built on social interactions especially role-playing games as this depends on group dynamics to be able to defeat their enemies in order to reach the next level of the game. It has also been emphasized that MMORPG is determined by many aspects, such as people, developers' maintenance, and the costing needs. Accordingly, the time that the data takes up which is something to do with the internet data traffic or *effects of latency* is something that needs to be aware of as this determines the delayed actions in the game (Fritsch et al. 2005). Meaning although MMORPGs seem to be promising, many problems need to be resolved to make the games more enjoyable as cheating is inevitable to help other players gain an advantage (Golle & Ducheneaut, 2005). Additionally, account hacking and using them illegally (Chen et al. 2005) were also found, and lastly, counterfeiting documents for illegal means (Chen et al. 2006a; 2006b).

All multi-user dimension or multi-user domain (MUDs) originally multi-user dungeon is a multiplayer real-time virtual world which is usually text-based (Kafal & Searle, 2010). It combines elements of role-playing games, player versus players and online chats (Downey, 2014). While role-playing games (RPGs) are games in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting, the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are video games that combine elements of role-playing games (RPGs) with the games played by multiplayer online gaming worlds (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008; Drachen, & Smith, 2008). All of these can be traced back to *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D or DnD) a fantasy tabletop role-playing game (RPG) originally designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. The

game can be played with a group of friends where a player leads his/her hero referred to as a 'character' through treacherous dungeons where the only boundary is a player's imagination. Dungeons & Dragons provide a core set of rules and instructions to follow, but within those rules, anything is possible (Cox & Campbell, 1990; Gallear, 2004). When players create their characters, they must make many choices that dictate the tasks they can perform based on their strengths and weaknesses. First, players select a race or species for their character that determines their strengths and weaknesses, based on the outlined role-playing game rules (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008; Drachen, & Smith, 2008). For example, the human species can be considered well-rounded, whereas, Halflings, due to their small stature, may have more dexterity but less strength. Dexterity and strength are just two of the attributes in Dungeons & Dragons used to determine the outcomes of many events (e.g., to determine how much damage a player will inflict on an enemy, his or her strength score is factored into the equation) (Achterbosch, Pierce, & Simmons, 2008). Dexterity may be used to determine the disabling of a trap, where players roll dice to determine whether the trap was successfully disabled or not. Second, players select one of several predefined classes, which determine what a player's capacities can be. For example, the fighter class is designed for close combat, so according to the Dungeons & Dragons rules a player in the fighter class will be able to wear heavy armor and wield any weapon, as well as have a large number of hit points (Gallear, 2004).

Empirical Results

1. Information Technology, MMORPGs, and Social Constructivism

With the introduction of the internet into people's daily lives, online games, such as MMORPGs, have increasingly become an important platform as a form of people's entertainment and even for making friends. The influence of this digital domain is apparent, especially among younger people (Gee, 2003). With the popularization of the network, they become the new users of online games and they have occupied an important part of their social life. According to the surveys (Gorritz, & Medina, 2000; Isara, 2006; Jaffe, 2011), more than 80 percent of young adults have been exposed to online games, and more than half of them express their love for online games.

On April 20, 1994, China opened the 64K international private line connected to the Internet through Sprint Corporation of the United States. The Internet officially landed in China, further introducing Chinese society to the Internet. On January 23, 2007, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 19th "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" and showed that the total number of Chinese Internet users has reached 137 million, accounting for 10.5% of the total population of China. From the perspective of penetration rate, netizen aged 18-24 is the highest, reaching 38.8%; the penetration rate of netizen aged 25-30 is 25.0%, and the netizen under 18 also reach 7.3%. This shows that teenagers are more likely to accept and use the Internet than people of other ages (Li, 2010). The indication is that students especially the younger ones have become the largest group of Internet users in China and provide an important platform for young people to learn knowledge, exchange ideas, and entertainment.

As of January 2022, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.02 billion, with a penetration rate of 73 percent (CNNIC, 2022). As internet users grow, online games have become an important force in the field of the internet economy. Teenagers under the age of 18 are the largest part of online game users (Jiang, 2014; Li et al., 2021). Role-playing games combined with the speed of the internet, the present games have produced a great attraction to students. Because of these changes, their value, ideology, cultural life, and educational ways are greatly influenced (Euatace et al., 2004; Isara, 2006). According to Chen et al. (2006), proper use of the *Internet* can help young students improve learning, expand interpersonal communication, and enrich their entertainment life.

MMORPGs offer an authentic environment for learning through an authentic virtual world where students have the opportunity to practice their communication skills (Rankin, et al., 2006). The benefits of MMORPGs over single-player games are found in the social interactions that take place between players. These conversations and confrontations take place in a virtual world where every new player starts with the same starting situation. Based on Chotipaktanasook and Reinders (2018), this type of digital interaction allows them to use a wider range of discourse functions compared with classroom interaction. Similarly, enhances their ‘freedom to learn while being away from classroom-related rules... enriches the learning experience, and practices collaborative learning experience’. (Ng, et al., 2022, p.369)

As observed in a study by Yee (2006), gamers or players are often classified as one group. This does not hold into account the diverse composition of the group of gamers. When looking at the different backgrounds of people, it is important to acknowledge that students only comprise a small amount of the whole group. However, when put together in the game, the differences concerning background, race, age, academic levels, nationality, etc. are discarded in service of a game-oriented motivation (Yee, 2006). As Liu and Peng (2009) stated, online players, are regarded as the social backbone and supportive network of a group as players all contribute as much as they can move forward in the game. That means, there is an engagement reflected in the emotional involvement or commitment in a group (Simpson et al., 2018). This is closely built on the idea of social- constructivism (Vygotsky et al., 2021) which sees learning as a social, active, and creative process (Ng, et al., 2022). This principle emphasizes that language is obtained and acquired when people engage in meaningful interaction with each other. Kongmee, et al., (2011) and Strachan, et al. (2016) emphasized that MMORPGs present a safe, fun, informal and effective learning space to support language teaching. Accordingly, communication makes language learning a concrete and authentic as students acquire a broader and deeper vision of the world of which they are a part as they find sanctuary within peer-interest-based communities of practice, maintain meaningful online connections and create the identities needed for successful integration (Przymus et al., 2020). Basically, learning is a process of social interactions and social practices (Paraskeva et al., 2010; Sundqvist, & Wikström, 2015; Sundqvist, 2019). Traditional ways of learning inside the classroom are regarded as internal levels while MMORPGs are regarded as external level and work as a stimulus to help the learners learn a language better (Simpson et al., 2018) as it allows and encourages students to interact while gaining support from others (Zuo, 2016). MMORPGs allow the learning of language to be realistic and facilitate English language proficiency as

learners interact in English while playing the game (Eustace et al., 2004; Isara, 2006; Kongme, et al., 2011; Waters 2007) and learn collaboratively (Sung & Hwang, 2013).

2. Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and their Educational Proliferation

Recently, many researchers are carrying out the study on the impact of online games on the language learning process. As MMORPGs require game players to build their characters individually, they need to participate in guilds to accomplish specific tasks and missions which include player-to-player communication. Therefore, this requires cooperation and the exchange of information through language and across different cultures' contexts and backgrounds (Paraskeva et al., 2010). As English is the lingua franca of online games, (Klötzl & Swoboda, 2019), players learn to communicate in English to understand and be understood (Adris, & Yamat, 2018).

An online game as a structured activity can typically engage enjoyment (Yang & Huang, 2013) and be used pedagogically (Lopes et al., 2019). Online games are known to have many rules and functions. According to Gibson (2005), learners have mechanisms to interpret unstable sensory input which helps them to experience a meaningful view of the world. MMORPG-based instruction is viewed as a source of sensory information that can draw the participants' attention to obtain knowledge and experience that foster interest in learning (Chin-Sheng & Chiou, 2007; Yang & Huang, 2013). MMORPGs are perceived as a potential new domain for teaching and learning (Bytheway, 2015). These pave the ways for foreign or second language learners as innovative and authentic tools for learning based on technological advancement and the digitalization of education (Golonka et al., 2014). This innovative learning environment is dynamic and viewed as the new normal among students who are digitally savvy as these provide enjoyable and interesting learning experiences (cited in Ng et al., 2022). Different studies were conducted by Rahimi and Hosseini (2011), Adris and Yamat (2018), and more recently by Mofareh, (2019) and Xu et al. (2020).

Furthermore, MMORPGs provide gamers with access to theme-based virtual worlds, real-time communication through text chat, opportunities for role-playing, guild membership, status advancement, problem-solving, and content creation. Moreover, they further utilize recent developments in computer technologies. The use of text chat has been supplemented with voice communication tools. Users of MMORPGs are provided with access to rich 2D and 3D virtual worlds that incorporate realistic high-quality graphical interfaces (Foo, & Koivisto, 2004; Isara, 2006; Kongmee et al., 2011a; Peterson, 2010). Accordingly, Sundqvist and Wikström (2015) stated that there is a significant difference between the linguistic benefits generated by MMORPGs when compared to single-player games. Game players who play MMORPGs are generally shown to have acquired more positive linguistic benefits than players of single-player games. Sundqvist and Wikström (2015) believed this can be attributed to the increased level of active participation demanded from the students as MMORPGs offer and often demand active social interactions (Sundqvist, 2019; Tan et al., 2017). Consequently, proffer authentic situations wherein students acquire linguistic input that would otherwise be more difficult to attain authentically in which students acquire linguistic input by practicing the target language (Rankin, et al., 2006). According to Rankin (2016), there is more interaction between students and speakers of English in online and virtual environments than in

real life. Social interactions are paramount when playing online since there are often requirements to join a group for a game's character to progress (Liu & Peng, 2009). Enabling, or forcing, social interactions in virtual situations also provides access to a more diverse audience since it opens the door for both introverted and extroverted people. This further supports the idea that MMORPGs offer a productive learning environment for language students (Yang, & Huang, 2013; Lenhart, et al. 2008).

Discussion

MMORPGs provide an important source to advance the quality of teaching and learning as these allow students to practice their communication skills in English fluently. MMORPGs have some advantages for teaching and learning. Firstly, MMORPGs can be a good source for interactive activities in educational settings that can be important in promoting independent learning. It offers language input that can help not only students but also teachers' language production. Additionally, it fosters cognitive abilities, critical thinking skills and supports collaborative learning that might ease the practice of the four macro skills: listening, and speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, the use of MMORPGs will likely contribute to the affective needs of students and promote learners' autonomy. However, disadvantages have a fair share too as MMORPGs are found containing violence or sexual games. Thus, if students do not have enough skills for computer navigation and without proper assistance, this might lead to finding incorrect information.

Pedagogically, therefore, although countless learning resources can be found by playing online games (MMORPGs), Students must be conscious that looking for the right information in the games needs proper skills or knowledge to apply and use for the English language learning. As well, students need to make sure that they have sufficient literacy to appreciate the usefulness of different pieces of English information when playing online games to fully appreciate what these materials can lead them into. Other than that, *ethical responsibility*, as the internet games (MMORPGs) provide learning materials that help them to ease their learning development. Thus, they need to be aware that they are responsible to acknowledge the sources they use and give credits to authors who are responsible for providing reading or writing materials. For example, video games or any texts found during the games.

As for TEACHERS, they need to be aware of the diverse learning styles of their students so that appropriate online games as part of activities can be selected to generate student interactions that can engage them in learning. Though the internet can provide different learning resources that the teachers need to teach. Teachers, therefore, need to understand that it is not about the MMORPGs alone but their teaching ability that matters most. Teachers need to be aware that MMORPGs as part of teaching tools can be used as additional teaching tools only and can be functional if these are used appropriately. Therefore, for knowing on what type of teaching resources, it still depends on the students' learning ability, the teacher's teaching skills, and the learning objectives of the lessons.

Conclusion and recommendations

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) as part of educational tools are the new domain in English language education, especially in the context of China. To change the perceptions of Chinese people especially those who still believe in the traditional ways of teaching, therefore, needs not only teachers but also institutions to support contemporary and innovative ways to educate students in this digital era. The most important aspect that MMORPGs show is how this can be used as an authentic and innovative way to develop students' language learning skills through collaboration and engagement. After all, learning is social interaction. Thus, using a language to communicate fluently in the digital space regardless of group of peers' language and culture, it can be regarded as the best way to learn the language specifically the English Language as this is used as a lingua franca of MMORPGs.

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